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A Worldwide Symbol of Misery

By Zack Gross

Every minute of every day, people are killed in armed violence. It may be as the result of a crime, or during a political conflict, or maybe “just” a hunting accident. Hundreds may die in conflict while you read this article. No weapon is linked to more small arms deaths in our history than the Kalashnikov or AK-47, of which there are currently as many as 100 million being used on the planet.

From the humble beginnings of the AK-47’s invention to the cult status it holds in some quarters today, the impact of this Russian weapon is undeniable. Mikhail Kalashnikov, its creator, was born around the time of the Russian Revolution and was exiled with his family to Siberia where they eked out a living as farmers. Kalashnikov worked with the railway and then joined the Red Army and was stationed in Kiev, Ukraine.

Still alive today, he calls his “greatest” invention a “Soviet duty,” as he was trying to come up with a weapon to counter the Nazi war machine. Ultimately, he received numerous awards from Russian Presidents, from Stalin to Yeltsin, but admits that he would rather have invented something useful to farmers, like a mower. He is disappointed that the weapon carrying his name has been used by terrorists, criminals and dictatorial governments.

It was in the early 1950s that the USSR, as the Cold War heated up, began to mass produce the AK-47, and distribute it to client states around the world. From the Viet Cong in Viet Nam to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, socialist and anti-US regimes received a modern, easy-to-produce version of the weapon, while Israel, Italy and other countries on the opposite end of the political spectrum began mass producing their own guns, but also based on the AK-47. US and US-supported fighters often abandoned their M-16s and used the AK-47s they took off fallen enemies. AK-47s were easier to keep clean, didn’t jam and withstood high humidity in tropical zones.

As a cult icon, the Kalashnikov is popular in the world of the arts. The AK-47 appears in many rap songs and is an expression of black rage in the US. It appears on cars as a “tough guy” symbol and in conflict art in many war zones, and it can be bought as a toy. You can also purchase AK-47 shaped lamps and, of course, Kalashnikov vodka. One observer called the AK-47 the IKEA of weapons. There are children named “Kalash,” video war games feature them, and Hollywood thrillers, such as James Bond, glorify them.

Of course, these weapons are designed for only thing – to kill people. They have proven to be the true weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). It has been said that there are more licensed gun dealers in the US than McDonalds outlets. In Rwanda, where a

million people were slaughtered in the 1994 genocide, AK-47s outnumbered cars and bicycles together. In Serbia, the scene of terrible slaughter in the 1990s, it is said that every household has at least one registered firearm and that there are almost as many illegal ones available.

Today's trouble spots, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, are awash with small arms, including AK-47s which can be bought for as little as \$US10. Child soldiers are brutalized and then armed with them. A ten-year old boy will be forced to shoot his own villagers with one and then is pressed into service with a rebel force. Women are raped at the point of an AK-47. Even when the gun user dies in battle or in a criminal act, the gun carries on killing in the hands of another.

Third World countries, such as Syria, Burma, Pakistan, Sudan and Burundi spend more money on their militaries than they do on health and education combined. Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Ethiopia, China, Ecuador and nine other countries spend more on the military than they do on either health or education.

Of course, on the other side of the ledger, five countries are responsible for 88% of arms exports in the world today – the US, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China. Shockingly, they are also the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council! Their total arms exports are \$15 billion dollars per year.

Non-governmental organizations and the United Nations have been working on treaties to curb the arms trade. Global agreement is easier to achieve than actual compliance. The trade continues openly via government to government sales, but also through a busy, international black market. However, a number of creative campaigns catch one's eye.

In Albania in the late 1990s, the UN sponsored a program whereby villages that collected guns from their citizens were given roads, telephone lines and police equipment. In Somalia, a lawless country rife with conflict, fighters who give up their guns to the UN are enrolled in training programs and receive an allowance while they get their lives in order. In Cambodia, people receive food or cash for guns.

In Mozambique, an organization has been established, called Transforming Arms into Tools. 200,000 weapons have been collected and many have been fashioned together into sculptures, while those handing them in have received tools with which to farm or ply a trade. In Canada, of course, while we are seemingly more peaceful, a battle has been waged back and forth around the issue of registering and restricting firearm ownership. As the Mozambican Bishop who leads Transforming Arms into Tools was quoted as saying: "Sleeping with a gun in your bedroom is like sleeping with a snake. One day, it will turn around and bite you."

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